

WILD about WEATHER

Local man has followed some of this country's biggest storms

Illustration: Elizabeth Pothier

By Ellen Tsickritzis
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Even as a young boy, Plympton's Philip O'Connell was fascinated by weather. He grew up by the ocean in Manomet and loved going to the edge of the bluff whenever the weather turned wild.

O'Connell was just 11 when one of the century's greatest storms — the 1938 hurricane — blew into Southern New England on Sept. 21. He remembers that day as one of the highlights of his life. He had heard the morning weather forecasters predict that the storm — which was then over Cape Hatteras, N.C. — would go out to sea well south of New England. Of course, predicting weather was a lot less reliable in 1938. Sometimes the fury of a storm hit without little or no warning. Sept. 21, 1938 was one of those days.

Continued from page B1

near stationary high pressure area to the east and one to the west.

"This was no ordinary storm that was approaching. As it turned out, it was a catastrophic hurricane heading, at a fast pace, right for us."

After arriving home from school, O'Connell headed right for the bluff. He watched as the winds increased to over 100 per miles per hour and the waters of Cape Cod Bay churned angrily. He had to lie flat on the bluff to keep from blowing off. Up and down the Southeastern Massachusetts coast, the storm had its way with bluffs, beaches, trees and houses.

On Valentine's Day 1940, O'Connell says he once again outsmarted the weather forecasters. According to him, the professionals didn't seem to think the storm was going to be significant. He knew differently.

He still remembers the morning weather map showing a rapidly developing storm on the east coast. It was heading in a northeasterly direction, apparently toward the open ocean. O'Connell got more and more excited as the storm developed into a classic northeaster. And, of course, he returned to his lookout on the bluff, dressed in foul weather gear and equipped with a flashlight and hand-held wind gauge. He remembers the wind being clocked at over 80 miles an hour.

O'Connell slowly made his way toward the Coast Guard Station at Manomet Point. He says the tidal surge waves had reached 10 feet up the bluff, washing lower portions into the sea.

Although O'Connell says there have been many memorable coastal storms since then, he puts the Blizzard of '78 at the top of the list. It was termed "the worst storm in history" and the devastation that February was massive and widespread.

WCVB meteorologist David Brown says the storm was predicted to be a blizzard, but the heavy winds which accompanied it, along with the astronomical high tides, combined to turn it into the powerful event which left a path of destruction. The real damage didn't come from the two feet-plus of snow, but from the constant ocean battering.

Plymouth Beach, White Horse Beach, and the Marshfield/Scituate coastline were among the worst hit areas. In Plymouth, many Taylor Avenue residents had to be evacuated. Bert's Restaurant was ravaged. The storm left cottages up and down the coastline in shambles.

Gov. Michael Dukakis — appearing on TV in a

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On the day the hurricane hit the area with its mighty force, O'Connell went to school as usual, but he couldn't concentrate on anything other than looking out the window. It was almost as if he had a premonition. In writing about the storm later, he claimed he was the only local person who knew for sure it was coming.

"It was a warm humid day," he wrote. "The windows were open. Tropical air was already moving in on a slowly increasing wind from the southeast quadrant. Billowing clouds were scudding across the sky. All clear signs that a Southeaster was approaching, whose center would move to the west of us. The weather map that morning showed an unobstructed trough of low pressure right up through the center of New England with a

Please turn to page B2

casual sweater — declared a state of emergency. All non-essential businesses and schools remained closed for more than a week and unnecessary travel was prohibited to allow the massive clean-up to take place. Mail was undelivered for several days. Emergency shelters were set up throughout the area.

The National Guard was activated to dig out the cars which were stranded on local highways — Route 128 was literally a parking lot in stretches — and extended power outages were widespread.

The town of Plymouth officially listed the snowfall at 24 inches, but the total doesn't take into consideration the massive snow drifts caused by the blowing snow, according to O'Connell.

In October 1991, the coastline south of Boston to Plymouth was again battered by another great storm. This storm had no name, but it did have all the characteristics of a hurricane.

The Halloween storm was unusual because of its formation. Three different weather systems collided — a Canadian cold front, the remnants of Hurricane Grace and a low pressure system off Sable Island, Nova Scotia — to create one massive storm which moved west to east. Wind gusts of 70 miles per hour and tidal surges over 60 feet above their normal levels, along with vast amounts of rain, caused major flooding to the beach areas. This type of storm is so rare and so potent that meteorologists coined it "the perfect storm." A best-selling book by that title was written by Sebastian Junger. This summer, filming of the movie version will start in Gloucester, with George Clooney starring as the captain of the ill-fated *Andrea Gail*.

Robert Bradley, owner of Pilgrim Sands Motel in Plymouth, was at the motel the day of the storm. "It was terrible. At low tide water was hitting the rocks in front of the motel," Bradley said. At that point Bradley and his employees knew they were going to get hit with water, but never expected the hurricane force winds. The window in his coffee shop shattered and waves were splashing over the second story roof. Bradley found furniture from the coffee shop in the parking lot. Every window on the ocean front was broken and the wall from the coffee shop disappeared. It was washed out to sea.

Although predicting weather isn't always easy and "the weatherman was wrong" jokes are as common as heat waves in August, Brown said trying to figure out the forecast in New England is "a passion. I love it. I'm always on duty and it's fun because of so many elements."

Philip O'Connell knows exactly what Brown's talking about, no matter which way the wind blows.